

Learning to Inhabit An Unimagined Future

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Our Call to Worship this morning reads: *We come to love a church - the traditions, the history, and especially the people associated with it.* I do love this church and its people and I am prepared to love those of you I've never met - for love is the currency we deal in here. Love is what we promise to one another; what we seek to cultivate in ourselves; what we seek to increase the measure of in this world. Oh, we don't always use that exact word. We talk about community and caring, friendship; but really what else are we about if not increasing the measure of love in the world? It seems to me that every time I preach, I'm talking about love, no matter the topic. Whether it's spirituality and finding the ways to connect to that deep source of love that permeates the universe and ever clasps us in its embrace; or, whether I'm preaching about inequality and injustice - as Cornell West says justice is what love looks like in public. And when I preach about my own journey, I share my struggle to better embody love - and all the other virtues that derive from that starting point - in the hope that something in my story might strike something in each of you to help you grow in love and its attendant virtues.

Today's sermon fits into that latter category. It was originally intended for my first Sunday back after my summer break, to share with you where I am in my grief process. But that was August 27 and we didn't have church that day - Harvey intervened. Nonetheless, I still think it is important to do for our life together. And we here are all grieving now to some degree - certainly those whose homes were flooded are grieving but even those of us not affected are grieving - for members of our church, our neighbors, the city as a whole. And grief is grief. Maybe something I say will help some of you. I framed my remarks around three poems by Mary Oliver which I found myself returning to this summer. Each of them invoke the image of a heron. This first is called:

White Heron Rises Over Blackwater

I wonder what it is that I will accomplish today, if anything can be called that marvelous word.

It won't be my kind of work, which is only putting words on a page,

The pencil haltingly calling up the light of the world,

Yet nothing appearing on paper half as bright as the mockingbird's verbal hilarity . . . in the shrub in the churchyard-

Or the white heron rising over the swamp and the darkness, his yellow eyes and broad wings wearing the light of the world in the light of the world-

Ah yes, I see him.

He is exactly the poem I wanted to write.

I wish that I could express as lyrically as Mary Oliver how grateful I am to have had time off. That time - and your continued care and support are a great gift. But if I hope to capture with anything like the clarity of a mockingbird's song or the brightness of a heron in flight what the

time away was like for me, I must start by first sharing some background information for those who are new. My husband Mark, my husband of 24 years and co-minister for 17, died suddenly, shockingly, last September from lung cancer after being diagnosed only three weeks before. Needless to say, the past church year was a difficult one. For me, certainly, grieving and trying to do two jobs. But for the staff and for church members too who were also grieving as well as stepping in to help fill the gaps. When summer arrived, I was pretty tired and looking forward to the break as a time of respite and a time to sit with my grief in a way that hadn't been possible in the press of the church year – and hopefully a time of renewal. There were some things I felt I needed to “accomplish”. And there are a few tangible accomplishments I can point to. I did attend to some long deferred household tasks and tasks associated with Mark's estate. And, of course, I did some work in preparation for the new church year. But mostly I have little concrete to show for my time off.

Throughout my grief process I've tried to be open and honest about it with the congregation. I've bucked what I consider our culture's pathology when it comes to grief - an unrealistic expectation that one should get “over” one's sorrow and loss quickly – or at least pretend that one has. I think that kind of denial only complicates and worsens the pain of loss. I think, too, that unacknowledged grief is part of the substrate of many of our society's problems. I've been determined to be authentic to my experience. I felt that the quality of our relationship as minister and congregation would be dishonored with anything less. And you have responded with love and support. I have felt well held in my grief by this congregation.

Some might have expected—or hoped-- that when I returned from the summer I would be over Mark's death. I know that any such hopes would have come out of genuine caring for my well-being. In honesty, I'm not there yet. And, in fact, I don't think you ever get “over” the loss of someone you dearly loved. Rather you find a place for that grief in your psyche. It becomes a part of you. Over time, of course, the acuteness and the insistency of sorrow eases. I had many moments of joy and grace – and fun - this summer: extended visits with cherished friends; sojourns at beach and mountainside; and countless everyday marvels of nature in my own backyard. Those gifts of friendship and love and natural beauty brought light and balm to my soul. But I also have to tell you that these last few weeks have been difficult as the anniversary of Mark's death and the events leading up to it has neared. There have been days when I have felt as if I am back in those excruciating first few weeks. And now of course I'm grieving as we all are for those whose homes were damaged, who have lost so much of the fabric of their lives. And yet, I know that I am in a different place than I was at the end of June, that I have “moved” in my grief. The spells of acute sorrow don't last as long, are not as overwhelming. This movement is hard to articulate; elusive as the poem the poet desires to write; and yet it is as unmistakable as the distinctive silhouette of a heron in flight. The task before me now is to embrace a previously unimagined future, my future without Mark.

In another poem Mary Oliver says there is only one question - how to love this world. How to love this world whole and no matter what transpires. It's a question we return to again and again if we aspire to lead a meaningful life faithful to our deepest values. Life does not always proceed according to plan as we well know in the wake of Harvey. And change – though not

always shocking – is inevitable. And, our conceptions about what life *should* be like – for ourselves and others - are continuously being interrupted if we are at all awake to the world around us. How do we inhabit a previously unimagined future? How do we stay open to life, to joy, to being of use? How do we trust again when it feels like the world has been turned upside down? How *do* we go on loving this world no matter what life deals us or others?

It isn't just a question for a grieving widow or even a grieving congregation; but a question that continuously presents itself given the tragedy and loss that occurs every day. How do we keep faith in life, nurture hope? One answer at least - an answer we try to embody in this congregation - is that we try to turn our individual losses to compassion for others and our individual trials into efforts to build a better future for all. (In that spirit we collect the morning's offering for service to the larger community.)

Some Herons

A blue preacher flew toward the swamp, in slow motion.

On the leafy banks, an old Chinese poet, hunched in the white gown of his wings, was waiting.

The water was the kind of dark silk that has silver lines shot through it when it is touched by the wind, or is splashed upward, in a small, quick flower, by the life beneath it.

The preacher made his difficult landing, his skirts up around his knees.

The poet's eyes flared, as poet's eyes are said to do when the poet is awakened from the forest of meditation.

It was summer. It was only a few moments past the sun's rising, which meant that the whole long sweet day lay before them.

They greeted each other, rumpling their gowns, for an instant, and then smoothing them.

They entered the water, and two more herons— equally as beautiful— joined them and stood just beneath them in the black, polished water, where they fished, all day.

Since I first became aware of them, I have been fascinated by the great blue heron. It is a bird of many guises. It is quite magnificent in flight; and yet often ponderous in its movements. It can seem awkward and heavy, even improbable, when taking off and landing. It is capable of standing perfectly still seemingly for hours, awaiting unwary prey – and yet can strike with lightning swiftness. A solitary heron standing patiently in shallow waters, hunched into its wings, is, to me, an evocation of wisdom and tenacious perseverance. In mid-flight, it is the embodiment of ease and grace. Mark, too, found great blue herons metaphoric. We often referred to them between us as “the gray-haired ones.”

When we lived in Virginia, Mark and I did a lot of canoeing and we often saw great blue herons on our paddling trips. A favorite run of ours was Bull Run Creek, a little jewel of a stream in the middle of Northern Virginia. Bull Run has a few class one and class two rapids soon after the put-in site, but for the most part it was an easy paddle through undeveloped woodlands. In summer, the dappled play of sunlight and shade, the stitch of cicadas, the ripples of water striders in the dark silky shallows, combined to affect an almost mesmerizing peacefulness, that lent

itself to hushed-toned observations and philosophical musings. Many, many times on that float, a great blue heron would accompany us along the way. As our canoe first grew close, the heron would gather its wings, heavily lift itself into the air, fly a short distance, and then in that awkward characteristic backstroke alight again; only to repeat the pattern anew as we drew close once more; hopscotching its way down the stream, as if leading us on. When we pulled over to the bank of an island to eat our packed lunch, the heron would stop and fish as if waiting for us to take up our paddles again. And so, Mark and I would spend most of that whole long sweet day in an exquisite, languorous communion. I say “most of that day” because the current runs out on Bull Run as you hit deadwater above the Occoquan Reservoir, and the last leg of the trip is an hour of hard flat-water paddling. At that point the heron would usually desert us; easily soaring over what required great effort on our part. Sometimes we’d be racing to make it safe across the open water against an oncoming summer thunderstorm and by the time we made it to shore, our arms would be screaming from the effort. But even in that, there was joy and satisfaction as we skimmed across the water pulling together in perfect sync.

The great blue heron possesses an inherent elegance and poise once in flight. It is the take offs and landings, the beginnings and endings, that are most awkward, hardest for the great blue. And so it can be for us. Each of us will face times when things as we know them have come to an end, when what has been is gone and what lies ahead is uncertain. In those times when we are brought down, forced to a halt, how do we lift ourselves out of the heaviness to fly once more? How do we give ourselves over to the forces that might keep us aloft?

My summer began with stark impressions of how irrevocably my life has changed. At the General Assembly of our denomination, I attended a luncheon held for the survivors of the ministers who had died in the last year. I was by far the youngest widow; the attendees my age were *children* of deceased colleagues. And, at the worship service honoring the ministers who had died, while I was surrounded by beloved colleagues and their spouses with whom Mark and I dined together at General Assembly every year for over twenty years, I was for the first time spouseless. People kept telling me how brave I was to be there at General Assembly, but where else should I have been, when my – and Mark’s – clan gathered? It was hard, but it was also necessary and right.

You see, I had thought Mark and I had several more years of co-ministry together and then the whole, long sweet time of retirement lying ahead of us. Now, if I stay healthy, what seems to stretch out before me is what could be a long, solitary and lonely time, without him. It’s not just Mark that is gone; but our shared imagined future is gone as well. Gone, too, is the Becky that was reflected back to me in Mark’s eyes. When couples who have been together a long time look at one another, they don’t really see each other as they are in the present, as others would see them, with all the, as they say, “visible signs of aging” - but as beloved incarnations of their younger selves. I will never be “equally as beautiful” again. And my identity - how I think of myself, how others think of me - has changed as well. I am no longer a “co-minister”. I am no longer the person who has a husband named Mark. I am a “widow” - not such a marvelous word, that. In many ways, I have to redefine how I understand myself. Literally, circuits in my brain have to be rewired. A word that came to mind a few weeks ago is that of “uncoupling” -

the way that one might disconnect the interlocking pieces of a trailer hitch, or take apart the pieces of a dovetail construction such as Mark used in making his beautiful boxes. Another image presented itself in a recent dream in which I had to redo my kitchen and was confronted with the question of what could I salvage from the kitchen Mark and I had remodeled together.

Of course, every widow and widower and every divorced person, too, faces this “uncoupling”, this task of redefinition. Indeed, for all of us, any deep loss or major change, any new reality, requires a reworking of the self. And, in fact, the task of redefining ourselves confronts all of us many times over the course of our lives. Because, as Judith Viorst wrote, life is a series of universal *necessary* losses that begin with the realization that our mother’s love, our father’s love, can never be ours alone, and proceed through the realizations that what hurts cannot always be kissed and made better; and that we are utterly powerless to protect ourselves or those we love from every danger and pain, from the inroads of time and aging, or from the coming of death.

At each of these junctures, Mary Oliver’s question will confront us – how to love this world – how to love this world whole, love this life, no matter what. How will we navigate the changes without closing ourselves off in a misguided attempt to protect ourselves from sorrow or without growing a hard, bitter shell to stave off heartbreak? How will we keep from shrinking from engagement with the world, knowing that engagement means embracing full well the possibility of disappointment or betrayal – and knowing, too, that engagement with the new will require different, sometimes difficult, things of us? And, on a larger scale, how will we grow in compassion when justice demands we take on, at least in part, the suffering of others, perhaps even sacrifice for the good of others? I truly believe allowing ourselves to fully grieve the pain of loss, disappointment and the discontinuity between what we think should be and what is - honestly and with the support of loving others - can make all the difference. And that is true not only for the individual but for society as well.

Heron Rises From The Dark, Summer Pond

So heavy is the long-necked, long-bodied heron,

always it is a surprise when her smoke-colored wings open and she turns from the thick water, from the black sticks of the summer pond, and slowly rises into the air and is gone.

Then, not for the first or the last time, I take the deep breath of happiness, and I think how unlikely it is that death is a hole in the ground,

how improbable that ascension is not possible, though everything seems so inert, so nailed back into itself-- the muskrat and his lumpy lodge, the turtle, the fallen gate.

And especially it is wonderful that the summers are long and the ponds so dark and so many,

and therefore, it isn't a miracle but the common thing,

this decision, this trailing of the long legs in the water, this opening up of the heavy body into a new life:

see how the sudden gray-blue sheets of her wings strive toward the wind;

see how the clasp of nothing takes her in.

I revisited Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge one day this summer. It was one of Marks' and my favorite places to go when we had a day to spare. We made it a ritual of sorts. There is an "auto-tour" that circles "Shoveler's Pond", one of the largest marshes on the refuge. But instead of driving, we would park our car and walk the loop, binoculars at the ready. Walking the loop was more of an immersion experience than driving could ever be. And because we usually went on a Monday – our day off – we usually had the place to ourselves except for the occasional ranger. We would always eat our lunch in the same place at the end of a long boardwalk that goes out into the center of the marsh. Hidden by tall sedges and reeds, it felt like our private spot. Over the years we had truly come to love Anahuac; saw it as stunningly beautiful. We've seen many different birds there - migrant species in the fall and spring – like snowgeese, warblers, flycatchers and raptors – even bald eagles - as well as what we called "the usual suspects": coots, cormorants and moorhens, 20 varieties of ducks, red winged blackbirds, many different kinds of shore birds –and of course great blue herons.

On this particular day, as I started off on the loop around Shoveler's Pond, a great blue heron was standing about twenty feet ahead of me in the shallows close to the road. As I drew nearer, it flew a short distance ahead of me and then landed again in the shallows. And so this one heron preceded me almost the entire day. Time after time as I grew close to its resting spot, it would gather its wings, heavily lift into the air, fly a short distance, and then in that awkward backstroke of the wings alight again; only to repeat the pattern anew as I drew close once more. I didn't think this was especially noteworthy at first – it wasn't untypical behavior for a heron – and my focus was drawn to other birds – in particular the usually skittish purple gallinule, which I saw in abundance that day. But as the day wore on, the heron's constancy impressed itself upon me. At one point, a ranger driving by in the opposite direction stopped to chat. And all the while I talked to the ranger, the heron stood a little way off and squawked, as if begrudging my attention. After the ranger drove on, the heron's and my hopscotch dance around the pond continued until we neared the entrance to the boardwalk where the heron stood and flapped its wings in a way that I had never seen – but which I've since learned mimics a courtship ritual. And then it flew away. But as I walked out on the board walk into the marsh and sat down in the usual spot, within minutes, a great blue heron landed not ten yards away from me. It stayed there the whole time I was eating. Was it the same bird? I cannot say. But as it heavily lifted itself into the air and flew off high into the sky, I felt as if I had been blessed with what earlier peoples might have called a "visitation from the gods" and I was suffused with a feeling of – what? – awe, peace, joy, but mostly a feeling of assurance that I would be okay, that I can learn to inhabit a previously unimagined future.

I have to create a new future for myself; we as a church have to create a new future for ourselves. But love has not deserted us. My love for Mark and his love for me is still a reality. The love of friends and church community – all that is still here – for me, for all of us. And, yes, the love at the heart of it all. And who knows, maybe I'll discover that widowhood suits me well; or perhaps the universe will move in such a way that I'll fall in love again. One thing I know for certain; this church and its work continues. We need one another always, but especially now in the wake of Harvey. And, yet, we know there are people in this world who have lost not just loved ones and homes but countries, indeed everything they knew. And still others whose lives are diminished every day by systemic racism and injustice. And so just as I must embrace a new future, we as a religious community must open ourselves anew to the embrace of life, and to the possibilities for a better world for all. We have to minister well to one another. At the same time, we cannot shrink from engagement. We have serious work to do. But there is also, joy and fun – we need to have some fun this year – and the deep breath of happiness awaiting us. As we turn toward our collective previously unimagined future, perhaps we can take inspiration from the vision of a large, sometimes ungainly bird rising above the dark sticks of the summer pond, its eyes gazing upward, its wings striving toward the wind. As Mary Oliver says this trailing of the long legs in the water, this opening up of the heavy body into a new life, does not require a miracle, but rather simply the decision to go forward, to trust in ourselves and in one another and to give ourselves over to life and the strength of love.